

{ DESTINATION AUSTRALIA }

Climbing Gower's mighty peak is the perfect way to survey pristine Lord Howe Island

IAN COCHRANE

UNDER a canopy of mountain palms, primeval smells of black mud and musty rainforest drench the air. Sphagnum moss smothers stunted trunks with bright green velvet, while moorei orchids cling to rotting stumps in an understory of lichens, staghorns and more than 30 species of fern.

In this mystical remnant of a place, we tramp prehistoric paths along a wet, silent, leaf-littered floor. My boots squelch, then slip on rock or slimy tree roots. Ducking under a branch, a shroud of old-man's-beard lichen tickles my face. Beetles found nowhere else on earth scurry about on their business. Palm fronds litter the burrows of sooty terns that will return tonight to find luminous glow-in-the-dark fungi, irresistible to snails and slugs.

In this 40ha cloud forest, where steamy drifts waft among a gloomy moss-laden world, I could be on New Zealand's South Island or lost in the Peruvian Andes.

Yet I look down from this magic mountain to a turquoise lagoon far below, bounded by a long dazzling beach and a sea pounding on the teeth of the planet's most southerly coral reef.

A sudden rustle and low resonant purrs from nearby undergrowth announce the arrival of the world's rarest bird. Woodhens are without tails, about 35cm long, olive-brown with rufous banded wings. This pair has claimed about 2ha: in days gone by they would have risked certain death by seeking us out. Like the NZ kiwi, with no predators they lost the ability to fly many generations ago. Curiosity satisfied, they nonchalantly scratch at our feet for worms, small invertebrates and insect larvae, tossing dead leaves aside with long curved beaks.

We are on NSW's Lord Howe Island atop Mt Gower, after clambering 875m up from sea level through palm forests. We have hugged ancient cliff-faces, trodden rock-crowded creek beds, hoisted ourselves by rope up impossible goat trails, and struggled for breath and footholds to reach this silent Eden at the southern end of the island.

Just a two-hour flight from Sydney, the World Heritage-listed island — 11km by 1.8km at the widest point — has one indigenous mammal, a bat. Five bird and more than 50 plant species occur nowhere else on the planet. Eighty million years ago, the territory was part of Gondwanaland, and six million years ago a volcanic eruption created the island.

Even intrepid Polynesian mariners did not venture here; the earliest arrivals came in 1788 on a ship that brought the first colonists to mainland Australia. The holds were filled with turtles and palm hearts to feed the starving mainland colonists.

The first permanent residents were three Englishmen and their families from NZ in 1834, farming meat and vegetables for the burgeoning whaling industry. American whalers arrived from Sag Harbor, San Francisco and Nantucket to hunt the middle ground. Goats and pigs were purposely let loose, as were cats and mice (accidentally). The seabirds, pigeons, parrots and woodhens were hunted and, having never known humans, they



Mt Lidgbird and the higher slopes of Mt Gower loom over a tranquil lagoon on Lord Howe Island

# Up a magic mountain



Hikers wend their way along a steep trail on Mt Gower



Ebbtide Apartments offer leafy views and warm hospitality

were easily clubbed and shot, their eggs and young taken. Plants, roots, tubers, grubs and insects were destroyed. Nine bird species were soon extinct.

A shipwreck in 1918 unleashed swarms of black rats; our guide Dean says a war has raged ever since, with 13,771 killed in 1927 alone. In 1922 the Tasmanian masked owl was introduced to take up the battle but took a liking to the remaining native birds.

With the whalers gone, the mainland authorities raised the question of relocating the islanders, who were obviously destitute in their ragged clothes of disused flour bags and goatskin moccasins. There was melaleuca tea, geranium-leaf smoking tobacco, and a heady alcohol brewed of wild figs and banana skins. Homes were simple rectangular structures, walled and gable-roofed with palm-frond thatch.

The mainland government surveyor noted the islanders' diet: garfish, salmon, rock cod, turtles, seabirds, eggs, sweet potato, peach pies, butter, milk and maize and an abundance of pig and goat.

He deemed their removal

unnecessary. No wealthy 1920s European home was complete without an exotic potted plant and Lord Howe's hardy kentia palm was the most sought after. The islanders were quick to promote a palm-seed industry.

On Mt Gower, the temperature drops and I sense an evil eye. I turn to meet the cold, golden stare of a satin-black currawong with its head cocked sideways, intent on stealing my thoughts. Smaller than its mainland cousins, it lets fly with a strident ringing call. Leg rings tinkle as it shifts its weight from one clawed foot to the other. The descent is more than three hours. Dean, who has been an island ranger for 16 years, points through the mist to the gothic spires of Balls Pyramid, 550m above an unsettled sea. It's a rocky Mont Saint-Michel floating on an antipodean ocean 20km south-east of the primeval forest where we stand.

Below me is a 20m rope we must clamber down; it's the Get Up Place. Wild pigs found this wall impossible to climb to the last haven of the woodhen. Gripping the rope tightly, I smile nervously

at my girlfriend as Dean suggests it's best to abseil down the vertical drop. We follow the Erskine Valley to the sound of trickling water, ambling between strange tepee pandanus propping themselves up with a profusion of roots from halfway up their trunks, until we reach another rope, high above boiling seas.

We don helmets as a precaution against frequent rock falls from the black volcanic cliffs and gingerly clamber beneath the face of 777m Mt Lidgbird and safely down to a rock and rubble beach.

On our Ebbtide cottage veranda we rest weary muscles, basking in sun filtered through stands of hibiscus, frangipani and the ubiquitous kentia palm. The winter air temperature is a balmy 24C. Green pawpaw orbs covered in droplets from showers hang from a gnarled trunk under a shiny canopy of leaves shaped like hands.

At dusk our host drops us at a local restaurant. We dine on freshly caught kingfish tempura and a South Australian riesling, and then the restaurateur returns us to our cottage, as is polite island custom. With no streetlights and

no moon, we marvel at the absence of mobile phones and the far-flung scatterings of the Milky Way.

We soon slumber as returning sooty terns chatter on the breeze, an emerald-winged dove coos and the Pacific ebbs and flows among the rocks of Hells Gate below us.

Next morning, we snorkel amid coral, myriad coloured fish and mammoth kingfish at nearby Nees Beach sanctuary.

Enroute to the airstrip we stop between tall Norfolk pines at the edge of the village. We talk with our host, Emma, a freckled 30-something mother of two young boys, of mainland restaurants and bright lights, boarding schools and finally of island hospitality. Emma stares out to sea.

"Yes, I was born here," she says. I must look surprised, and she laughs. "In the shadow of that mountain." She casually waves an arm towards the lagoon and a distant Mt Gower. Palm fronds sway in the breeze, sounding like light rain. "I guess you reach a certain age and an island just isn't big enough; there's a need to see the world," I say. She shrugs and

smiles. "Maybe you just wake up and realise everything was always here, at the foot of that magic mountain."

## Checklist

QantasLink offers year-round scheduled services to Lord Howe Island from Sydney on most days and from Brisbane on weekends. A seasonal weekly service is available from Port Macquarie on the NSW mid-north coast from February to June and September to December. More: [lordhoweisland.info/qantaslink](http://lordhoweisland.info/qantaslink). Ebbtide Apartments offers secluded cottages amid tropical gardens. More: [ebbtide-lhi.com.au](http://ebbtide-lhi.com.au). Capella Lodge offers five-star accommodation with spectacular views over Lidgbird and Gower mountains. More: [lordhowe.com](http://lordhowe.com); [baillielodges.com.au](http://baillielodges.com.au). Dean Hiscox of Lord Howe Environmental Tours conducts nature tours, snorkelling and diving expeditions, kayaking and boat tours plus guided hikes up Mt Gower. More: [lordhoweislandtours.com](http://lordhoweislandtours.com).

## STATE OF PLAY



Stay near Sydney airport in relaxing surrounds

# Flights of fancy, with pillow menu

An airport hotel doesn't necessarily have to be a place of rough landings

SUSAN KUROSAWA

WHEN novelist Douglas Adams wrote, in *The Long Dark Tea-Time of the Soul* (1988), that in no language was there the phrase "as pretty as an airport", he could easily have extended the slur to "airport hotel". Airport hotels rarely are things of beauty and, to paraphrase Douglas, some attain a degree of ugliness that is the result of special effort.

Airport hotels aren't required to be pretty; they exist not as exotic destinations or places for idle dalliances but as plain old departure points. They need to deal in efficient sound-proofing, proper blackout curtains, wake-up calls and shuttle buses that arrive on time. If they are even vaguely attractive, it is a bonus.

Management at the 271-room Mercure Sydney Airport (it used to be the Hilton), located a hop from the international terminal and also well placed for access to the two domestic terminals, has decided a bit of beautification is in order to cheer up anxious departing passengers and jet-lagged new arrivals.

Three floors (levels seven to nine) have been refurbished in a fresh contemporary style that easily matches that of a chic, four-star city property.

These good-sized Superior category rooms feature king-sized beds with a pillow menu, striped cushions in autumn tones, wall-mounted flat-screen televisions, work tables (with data points at desk height; no crawling on the floor with leads and plugs), crisp all-white bathrooms and excellent reading lights.

There are sheer curtains and black-out drapes and, as the hotel is not directly under the flight-path, little aircraft noise. Add a convivial bar, reasonably good bistro with a wine list of interest-

ing NSW labels, outdoor pool, gym and tennis and squash courts, and being temporarily stranded here because of delayed flights would be no hardship.

The hotel also has a Privilege category of rooms that includes extras such as an espresso machine and T2 tea selection, internet access, bottled water and chocolates. There are family rooms as well (accommodation for up to five guests) and executive suites with separate sitting rooms.

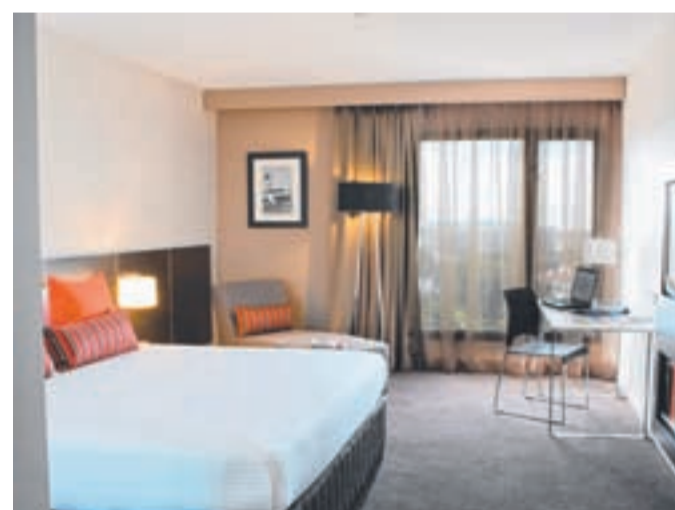
At many Asian airports, such as Singapore and Bangkok, you can stay in a hotel before or between flights without even leaving the terminal. You just wheel your trolley to your bed.

Mercure Sydney Airport doesn't offer that level of instant convenience but a shuttle bus to the nearby terminals is just \$6 one-way (be sure to book) and there's the definite bonus of fresh air, a green setting near the Cooks River and Kogarah Golf Course, and the prospect of a leg-stretch and a hit of tennis.

It's an airy and roomy remove from the airport "pod" hotels, such as the Yotel at London's Heathrow and Amsterdam's Schiphol. Passengers are filed away in these clinical little cabins like stacked folders. Brings new meaning to iPod, and they don't look much bigger than a handheld device, either. No thanks.

## Checklist

The best overnight deal starts at \$259 for two, with up to seven nights' parking and complimentary return airport shuttles. More: (02) 9518 2000; [mercuresydneyairport.com.au](http://mercuresydneyairport.com.au).



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